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ABSTRACT

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Ventriloquating Shakespeare: Ethical Positioning in Classroom Literature Discussions

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This article describes how political and ethical positioning in classroom discussions can be intertwined with productive conversations about the subject matter. Discussions of compelling literature can involve a tight linkage between the subject matter discussed and the ethical positions taken by students and teachers as they engage in productive classroom discussion. At the same time as they discuss literature in deliberate, rational, pedagogically productive ways, teachers and students also often adopt their own positions on political and ethical issues raised by the literature. This positioning is a form of action: it is not necessarily planned and sometimes not even conscious. This article illustrates such positioning, and shows how it can be interconnected with the subject matter, by analyzing one ninth grade English classroom discussion in an urban US high school.

Colleoni High is a large three-story brick building that occupies an entire city block. Although the custodians work diligently – so that the tile floors often shine and the bathrooms are clean – the physical plant is deteriorating. Paint peels off the ceilings in most hallways and classrooms, and the building feels old. When it was built about 50 years ago, Colleoni High enrolled primarily Catholic children from Irish and Italian backgrounds. Now the neighborhood has become predominantly African American, together with smaller but growing populations of Latino and South Asian immigrants.

Mrs. Bailey's 9th grade English class includes fifteen students: four boys and eleven girls; one Asian, three white and eleven black students. These students are part of a special program, one based on Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal* (1983), in which students are encouraged to discuss "genuine questions." That is, "seminar" discussions like the one analyzed here involve students presenting and defending positions on complex questions, not simply parroting back the teacher's preferred answers. Mrs. Bailey is a veteran English teacher known in the school both for her academic standards and for being sympathetic to students' legitimate concerns. Her classroom has high ceilings and a row of windows along the far wall. The desks are arranged in a circle in the center of the room, with the teacher seated in

a desk just like the students. Although the room is old, Mrs. Bailey has covered most of the walls with various materials-posters encouraging students to work hard because of the rewards of a diploma, information about grammar and other aspects of the curriculum, and a "dialect wall." The curriculum includes literature from various cultural traditions, especially African and African American. When a word in African American Vernacular English or some other dialect appears in a reading, Mrs. Bailey asks students to define the word and she puts the definition on the dialect wall. It contains definitions like "to dis" = "to disrespect someone" and "your grill's busted" = "you're ugly."

The assigned text for this particular class discussion is Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in particular Antony's speech to the Romans. At this point in the play, Brutus, Cassisus and the other conspirators have killed Caesar and are addressing the Romans who have gathered to hear about Caesar's demise. Antony has remained loyal to Caesar, and he is thus distrusted by Cassius and several other conspirators. But Brutus allows Antony to speak to the gathered Romans, on the condition that he focus on Caesar and say only good things about the conspirators themselves. In his speech Antony skillfully vilifies the conspirators, without explicitly condemning them.

Mrs. Bailey helps the students explore several aspects of Antony's speech. She asks why Brutus would let Antony speak, when several other conspirators opposed this. She asks why Antony incites the Romans to violence as he does. And she asks why many Roman plebeians take Antony's side. These are questions about this particular play, and students do seem to understand the play better at the end of the discussion than they do at the beginning. But these questions also raise political and ethical issues of continuing relevance. Like the rest of us, Mrs. Bailey and her students face questions about how to interpret politicians' claims and actions. Do politicians often act on principle, or are their actions usually scheming and self-interested? The teacher and the students also themselves face questions about the relations between different social classes. Do ordinary, working-class citizens deserve their subordinate status, or is society unjustly organized?

Because compelling literature raises political and ethical questions that contemporary readers continue to face, classroom discussions of such literature can engage teachers and students in struggles over their own beliefs and identities. I argue that the subject matter content of classroom literature discussions – the characterization, themes, and other topics that form the official curriculum – often gets intertwined with political and ethical positioning (Davies & Harré 1990) that teachers and students also do in discussions of literature. At the same time as they discuss Brutus, Antony and the Roman citizens, for instance, we will see that Mrs. Bailey and her students *themselves* adopt political and ethical positions on issues raised by the play. Following and extending Bakhtin (1935/1981), I argue that positioning is common in discussions of literature. Teachers and students often

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adopt political and ethical positions with respect to recognized groups and issues from the larger society, as they discuss literature that presupposes those groups and raises those issues. Sometimes individuals provisionally adopt positions in a particular discussion, then discard them. But sometimes positioning in classroom literature discussions can reveal or partly create more enduring identities for individual teachers or students.

This article describes how political and ethical positioning in classroom discussions can be intertwined with productive conversations about the subject matter. Following others, I argue that classroom discourse is multifunctional – speakers simultaneously describe the subject matter and also use speech to position themselves with respect to others and with respect to salient political and ethical issues (Cazden 1988; Halliday 1978; Hymes 1996; Luke 1995). But I also show how discussions of compelling literature can involve a tight linkage between the subject matter discussed and the ethical positions taken. By means of this linkage, teacher and students can implicitly communicate about social class and other issues salient in their own lives. In other words, at the same time as they discuss literature in deliberate, rational, pedagogically productive ways, teachers and students also often adopt their own positions on political and ethnical issues raised by the literature. This positioning is a form of action: it is not necessarily planned and sometimes not even conscious. But systematic analysis of how people speak can uncover evidence of positioning even when it is not conscious for the participants (Wortham 1994, 2001a).

My analysis of positioning in literature discussions follows the turn in literacy studies toward a more sociocultural and historical perspective (e.g., Dyson & Freedman 1991; Schultz & Fecho 2000). Many literacy scholars have found the Russian literacy critic Mikhail Bakhtin particularly useful for examining how sociohistorical context influences students' developing literacies and their engagement with literature (Cazden 1996; Schuster 1997). Bakhtin (1935/1981) describes how all speakers must articulate their own voices by "renting" the words and ideological positions of others. Literacy scholars have analyzed how, as students develop literacy, they rent others' words and then themselves adopt positions with respect to the types of people whose words they are renting – thus entering "dialogue" with others' voices (Hicks 1996; Lensmire 1994).

I follow this sociocultural approach to literacy, exploring how teachers and students borrow ethical positions from the larger social world and adopt these positions through classroom discussion of literature. I use Bakhtin's central concept of "voice" and "ventriloquation" in order to analyze how teachers and students adopt political and ethical positions through their discussions of literature. My approach goes beyond previous work on Bakhtin and literacy by showing the complex and inevitable interconnections between subject matter content and positioning, and by illustrating a systematic empirical approach to classroom discourse that can uncover such positioning (Wortham 1994, 1996).

Brutus

Bakhtin begins his definition of "voice" by observing the "internal stratification" of language.

> Language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents.... All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life (1935/1981:293).

The social world is composed of many, overlapping social groups – religious groups, family groups, ethnic groups, and so on. These groups can be defined by social position and by ideological commitments. "Certain features of language take on the specific flavor" of particular groups (Bakhtin 1935/1981:289). Y'all, for instance, would normally be used by speakers from the American South – but not by Southerners trying to avoid sounding Southern. Speakers inevitably use words that have been used by others, words that "taste of" or "echo with" the social locations and ideological commitments carried by those earlier uses (Bakhtin 1953/1986:88). Speaking with a certain voice means using words that presuppose some social position because these words are characteristically used by members of a certain group. A voice is a social position from the stratified world, as presupposed by stratified language.

As Mrs. Bailey and her students begin discussing Julius Caesar, the students presuppose a relatively positive voice for Brutus – as an honorable person who views others charitably. In the following segment Mrs. Bailey asks why Brutus allows Antony to address the Romans. (In these transcripts, "T/B" refers to Mrs. Bailey. All the other speakers are students-for instance, "GER" is Germaine, "TYI" is Tyisha, "CAS" is Cassandra, etc. Transcription conventions are in the appendix).

118	T/B:	why bother- you just knocked the man off. You killed him be cause he was bad for Rome.
119		Why are you giving Antony an opportunity to say good things about Caesar. (4.0)
120	GER:	well because they say he [was
121	T/B:	[Germaine speak up
122	GER:	he wasn't a bad person but he wasn't good for Rome?
123	T/B:	Brutus thinks he wasn't a bad person but he just wasn't good for Rome. So why let him talk?
124	MAT:	because- Antony is only gonna say how he was a good person by saying
125		he wasn't right for Rome.
126	T/B:	Cassius isn't real keen on this idea, Brutus seems to really

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		think that they should do it.
127		What does this say about Brutus.
128	TYI:	Brutus on one side- Cassius looks on the bad side of things.
129		Brutus always looking on the good side?
130	T/B:	who's going to be right.
131	Female ST:	Cassius?

Germaine says that, from Brutus' point of view, Caesar "wasn't a bad person." And Tyisha adds that "Cassius looks on the bad side of things [while] Brutus [is] always looking on the good side." Despite the cynicism of Cassius and other conspirators, Brutus believes that Antony will act honorably. Students do not seem strongly committed to this view of Brutus, but at several points they give him a positive voice.

194	T/B:	what did Brutus seem to think about people? (10.0)
195	CAS:	that they should have the decisions? Like who should be king and stuff? (4.0)
196	T/B:	I don't think he wants a king. 'cause that's why he gets rid of Caesar.
		You think he thinks people
197		should have decisions? Be able to make decisions?
198	LAK:	yeah. Because he do what they want? Like um when he got them- the letters that's when he start
199		changin' his mind? 'cause he give the people of Rome what they want?

In response to the teacher's question "what did Brutus seem to think about people," Cassandra says: "that they should have the decisions...like who should be king and stuff?" Tyisha immediately concurs, saying that "he give the people of Rome what they want." At this point in the discussion, at least some students presuppose that Brutus is defending the interests of the Roman people. Just as in the earlier segment, when students presented Brutus as thinking well of people, here students assign him the positive voice of a politician who is concerned to honor the people's wishes.

Bakhtin claims that both novelists and speakers like Mrs. Bailey and the students do more than assign voices to literary characters. In addition, novelists have "the gift of indirect speaking" (1961/1986:110). They make their points by positioning themselves with respect to others' voices, not by speaking directly in their own. Narrative discourse contains at least three layers: it refers to and characterizes narrated objects; it presupposes voices for the characters who are represented; and it establishes a political and ethical position for the narrator himself or herself. Bakhtin uses the term "ventriloquation" to describe how a novelist positions himself or herself by speaking through others' voices. All utterances are "filled with others' words.... These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (1953/1986:89). By re-accentuating others' voices, narrators and ordinary speakers can establish positions for themselves. Bakhtin presents this metaphorically as "ventriloquating" others' voices.

In discussing *Julius Caesar*, one could take at least two views of Brutus – i.e., there are at least two possible sorts of ventriloquation that an author or interpreter might adopt. It might be admirable of Brutus to think well of people, despite the fact that in Roman politics, as elsewhere, nice guys often finish last. Or it might be foolish of him to believe that Antony would keep his word or would value the good of Rome above his own self-interest. Early in the classroom discussion, the students have not yet firmly adopted one of these positions, but they seem to be initially inclined toward the former.

Mrs. Bailey, however, adopts the latter sort of ventriloquation. For instance, her use of "right" at line 130 presupposes that Brutus was wrong to think well of Antony. As the discussion continues, Mrs. Bailey takes a definite position with respect to Brutus: he is foolish to have faith in people and she is wise enough to know better.

229	T/B:	play this off. I mean- is Brutus listening to the plebeians or is Brutus listening to
230		some other voices within the community of Rome? (2.0) when people say let's get rid of Caesar is he
231		listening to the shopkeepers and the cobblers like we ran into at the beginning
232	JAS:	no (4.0)
233	T/B:	Who's he listening to Jasmine
234	JAS:	the patricians (3.0)
235	T/B:	OK so what does that tell us about Brutus. (8.0) OK- I just wanted to make sure that we get it out
236		on the table that good old Brutus is not out saying all the little people in Rome should get a vote or
237		something. He believes that this should be a continuation of the way things have been. Which is that
238		you've got a republican form of government with the patricians basically ruling and there's some
239		representation of the plebians through the tribuneship isn't there, if I remember my history right. (3.0).
240		OK? (1.0) There's another aspect of Brutus though. You were- making reference to it before. Brutus
241		thinks well of people doesn't he? (2.0) and Cassius seems to suspect people. Let's keep that one in mind
242		also. OK let's go on and see what this guy Antony does.

At line 236 Mrs. Bailey refers to Brutus as "good old Brutus." This seems to mock the students' earlier voicing of Brutus as "good" (i.e., as a true democrat), and it suggests that Mrs. Bailey does not see him as good. She goes on to give an imagined quotation, one that in her opinion Brutus would never say: "all the little people in Rome should get a vote." Her use of "little people" here, like her use of "good old Brutus," seems to mock the students' faith in Brutus as a democrat. Brutus, she suggests, thought of the Roman plebeians as little people, not as worthy of substantial political representation. Just as Brutus was naïve to think that Antony would not act in his own self-interest, the students are naïve to think that Brutus was

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a true democrat. Mrs. Bailey apparently would expect Antony and Brutus to act in their own self-interest, not for higher principles like honor or the good of the people.

Just as with the question of whether Brutus is admirable or naïve, reasonable people could differ on how to interpret Brutus' democratic instincts. An author or commentator might position himself or herself as an admirer of representative forms of government. A commentator adopting this position could acknowledge that Rome was not a democracy, while nonetheless noting that a limited representative government is better than a dictatorship-and perhaps Brutus has something in common with us modern democrats if this is in fact the sort of government he favored. The students might have adopted this position, given their initial reactions to the teacher's questions about Brutus. But Mrs. Bailey adopts a different ventriloquation. She voices Brutus as an elitist – a rich man out to maintain the privileges of his own class. She positions herself as wise enough to know that politicians like Brutus are not actually defending the interests of the common people.

Bakhtin's discussions of authorial positioning describe how a novelist, in representing interactions among voices, inevitably takes an evaluative position on those voices. Dickens, for example, often scoffs at self-righteous businessmen and the 19th century English society that valorized them (cf. Wertsch 1991). I argue that teachers and students discussing literature are in this respect similar to novelists. Like novelists, teachers and students identify with certain voices while distancing themselves from others. The author has already juxtaposed and evaluated voices in a certain way, but teachers and students add another layer of ventriloquation. By their responses to the voices that certain characters speak with, teachers and students take political and ethical positions with respect to voices and with respect to larger social issues.

In her voicing and ventriloquation of Brutus, Mrs. Bailey takes a relatively cynical position on whether it is naïve to think well of people and whether politicians routinely act in their own self-interest. Her position is not the only one possible on these political and ethical questions, although it is certainly plausible in some respects. The following analyses of the voicing and ventriloquation that teacher and students adopt with respect to Antony and the Roman plebeians show that Mrs. Bailey continues to adopt a relatively cynical position throughout the class discussion. The analysis will also show that students seem to adopt even more cynical positioning with respect to Antony and the plebeians.

Before proceeding to analyze how the students and teacher voice Antony, two qualifications are necessary. First, the few utterances described so far do not provide definitive evidence for teacher and students' positions. By speaking as they did, the teacher and students put "into play" the types of positioning that I have described. Mrs. Bailey's cynicism toward Brutus, and perhaps toward politicians in general, can now be coherently presupposed by others in this interaction. But if she changes her positioning in

subsequent talk, the few utterances described in this section might not turn out to be central. Any discourse analysis of this sort must have the methodological discipline not to point to a few isolated utterances as definitive evidence for one interpretation. Instead, we must look for more extensive patterns of utterances that emerge over the course of an interaction (Hymes 1996; Silverstein 1985, 1998; Wortham 1996, 2001a; Wortham & Locher 1996). The analyses in subsequent sections describe a more extensive pattern of utterances, one that I will argue comes strongly to presuppose a cynical position both for Mrs. Bailey and for the students.

Second, Mrs. Bailey may well be right in her reading of Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself probably evaluated Brutus more cynically, as Mrs. Bailey does. So in pushing students toward this reading, Mrs. Bailey is doing her job as an English teacher. In addition, however, she is also communicating something about the nature of politics and the typical relationships between politicians and the common people. Compelling literature like this engages issues that still apply to contemporary readers. While discussing such literature, teachers and students also adopt political and ethical positions on the issues raised by the literature. Bakhtin argues that novelists generally cannot help but ventriloquate their characters' voices. Similarly, I argue that classroom discussions of compelling literature often involve two simultaneous and interconnected levels of activity: discussion of the text, to help students develop plausible interpretations of the subject matter; and positioning oneself with respect to the types of political and ethical questions made salient by the text.

Antony

As was the case with Brutus, most students do not seem to have strong opinions about Antony at the beginning of the discussion. Insofar as they express an opinion, they give him a positive voice. In many places, however, the teacher voices Antony as scheming and manipulative. She starts this voicing in her initial question to the class.

9	T/B:	Okay, Antony is going to talk to the people, and what do we know about what Antony is planning?
10		[background conversation unintelligible]
11	T/B:	shshhh! OK, give me a break. What do we know about what Antony's up to? Okay, Germaine louder

When she restates her question, she asks: "what do we know about what Antony is up to." Saying that someone is "up to" something often presupposes the person is scheming and engaged in morally questionable activities. Mrs. Bailey's use of this term might presuppose that Antony is scheming against the plotters and manipulating the Roman plebeians. But this one cue does not establish a definitive voice for Antony, and the teacher does not presuppose anything else of this sort about Antony until later in

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the discussion.

Later on the teacher does say several more things that presuppose a scheming, manipulative voice for Antony. In this passage they are discussing whether Antony violates his agreement not to say anything against Brutus and the other conspirators.

475	T/B:	Well- why would he want to stop before he got carried away. (1.0)
476	NAT:	That's not in the agreement. You don't start talkin' and talking too much
477	T/B:	He was not supposed to go against the agreement. And he's kinda skirtin' the edges of the
478		agreement here. But why stop at this point. What is he going to do?
479	Female ST:	Gonna let the people talk? Say something.
480	T/B:	Why would he want the people to say something.
481	Female ST:	He wants to see what they thinking? so he knows if he's convinced to take away or let
482		the people know that (1.0) what he say- is kinda sink in their heads so they can help 'im
483	T/B:	So he's stopping to find out what, kind of effect he's having on his audience

When she says "he's kinda skirting the edges of the agreement here" (lines 477-478), Mrs. Bailey presupposes both that Antony is not keeping his word to the conspirators and that he is skillfully using his speech to influence the Roman plebeians without explicitly condemning the conspirators.

At several other points the teacher presupposes that Antony is scheming against the conspirators and manipulating the plebeians to join his side and overthrow the conspirators. She asks "what is he [Antony] setting up in people's minds" (line 425), and she says "now he's [Antony] got them [plebeians] revved up to hear it" (line 580). Both "setting up in people's minds" and "got them revved up" presuppose that he is manipulating the plebeians. Later on, she says that Antony's "got them- he's playing them, and he's got- he's pretty sure he's got them on a line now" (lines 593-594)- an image that again presupposes Antony is manipulating the plebeians. At another point Mrs. Bailey reads lines from Antony's speech herself, using intonation that indicates her own position. They have been discussing an alleged will of Caesar's, and Antony has implied that the plebeians are beneficiaries of the will.

551	T/B:	so do you think the will has something about the patricians in it. Or is it dealing with the
552		common folk?
553	Female STS:	I think its dealin' with the common folk.
554	Female ST:	I think its dealing with the people.
555	T/B:	Okay? So- again we've gone through this thing. He says I don't plan on stirring you up to
556		mutiny and rage (1.0) because I would do Brutus and Cassius wrong. who you know are HONorable

557		MEN?
558	MRC:	to be sarcastic?
559	NAT:	If they so honorable why did they kill Caesar.

When Mrs. Bailey reads from Antony's speech (at lines 555-557), she uses a sarcastic tone of voice to say "honorable men." In enacting Antony's role here, she makes clear that she sees him as scheming against the conspirators and manipulating the plebeians.

The students, as shown in lines 558-559, pick up on Mrs. Bailey's voicing of Antony. Throughout the second half of the class discussion, in fact, the students adopt the teacher's voicing of Antony in several places. In the following segment, the students carry on their own discussion of whether Antony really means it when he says Brutus is an honorable man.

399	MRC:	Then why would he say Brutus is a honorable man if he didn't think so too.
400	JAS:	I don't think he think so. I think he just- you know.
401	TYI:	He gotta say something good. You know he can't just come flat out Brutus is bad, Caesar-
402		You can't come flat out.
403	STS:	[3 sec overlapping comments]
404	JAS:	you know like- they know like- OK? He mentioning like the good things. Caesar did.
405		and then. you know and then [Brutus killed him.
406	Female ST:	[he'll
407	TYI:	[yeah. yeah.
408	JAS:	he said like Brutus is an honorable man but he killed Caesar. like that.
409	CAN:	proves this is wrong. and trying to get the people to stop- you know
410	JAS:	but he not going to say it right out.
411	Male & Female STS:	[3 sec. overlapping comments.]
412	MRC:	So he's just trying to be sarcastic.

Here Tyisha explicitly characterizes part of Antony's strategy: because the conspirators are in control of Rome at the moment, he cannot say "flat out" that Brutus is a bad person for killing Caesar. Jasmine then goes on to characterize the rest of the strategy. Antony juxtaposes his praise for Caesar with his statement that Brutus is an honorable man, such that the audience will likely infer sarcasm on Antony's part. Later in the discussion, Candace summarizes Antony's plan to manipulate the plebeians. She says that Antony is "trying to get people to change their minds. Minds are changing in each of the steps 'cause after he talks their minds'll keep changing and changing, and today like yeah let's go after Brutus" (lines 507-509). As shown in these segments, several of the students clearly understand and themselves adopt the voicing of Antony that has been presupposed by Mrs. Bailey. They explicitly describe him as scheming to overthrow the conspirators and as manipulating the Roman plebeians in order to accomplish this goal.

Mrs. Bailey and the students almost surely have Shakespeare's voicing

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of Antony right, and in guiding them to this conclusion the teacher is doing a skillful job. In fact, in a conversation immediately following this class Mrs. Bailey and the two outside observers in the class (a prospective student teacher and me) agreed that this had been a particularly productive class and that the students seemed to learn a lot. In retrospect, our judgments were based on two factors: that a large group of students clearly understood Shakespeare's voicing of Antony and provided evidence from the text to support their conclusions; and that students directed some important parts of the discussion themselves, without relying on Mrs. Bailey to lead them. In both of these respects I continue to believe that this class was successful in teaching the curriculum.

At the same time as students were learning about Shakespeare's characterization of Antony, they were also taking political and ethical positions on issues of continuing relevance. Almost all interpreters would agree that Antony does in fact scheme to manipulate the plebeians and overthrow the conspirators, but the ventriloquation of this voice raises more contested questions. But an author or commentator could position himself or herself in at least two different ways. One might be horrified by Antony's plans. Antony, after all, intends to start a horrible civil war in which many plebeians will be killed, just because he wants to avenge Caesar and gain power for himself. Or a commentator could position himself or herself as wise enough to realize that this is how the political world is. Politicians are out to defend their own interests, and little people often get hurt in the process. These are not the only two positions one could take on Antony's plans, but the plausibility of at least these two positions shows that reasonable people could differ on this salient ethical issue raised by the play. I argue that – just as novelists do not often speak "from nowhere," but instead position themselves with respect to the voices of their salient characters – Mrs. Bailey and the students end up taking a position on Antony's actions.

The Plebeians

The teacher and students take a position on Antony's scheme as they voice and ventriloquate the plebeians. There are at least two possibilities. They could voice the plebeians as being unjustifiably victimized by Antony's machinations and position themselves as horrified by Antony and sympathetic to the plebeians. Or they could voice the plebeians as deserving what they get and position themselves as cynical.

Early in the discussion, Mrs. Bailey pointed out an irony in the Roman plebeians' response to Brutus.

140	T/B	When we finish- when Brutus finishes his speech, what do the people want to do. (1.0)
141	GER:	Crown Brutus
142	T/B:	hhnh, crown him. Do you see anything ironic in the fact that the people now want to crown

143		Brutus? (2.0)
144	Female STS:	[overlapping unintelligible talk]
145	T/B:	I am sorry.
146	CAN:	I said the people are silly?
147	T/B:	The people are silly.
148	CAN:	Its like somebody dies- first they like- and then when Caesar overcame him they said Let's Cr-
149		Yo caesar, Let's crown Caesar. and then when Caesar gets in power and then Brutus' conspiracy
150		that killed him uh, Caesar and then um- Now they want to crown Brutus because um. I mean that's
151		kind of silly.
152	Female ST:	Maybe they just want to go with the people with the most power? they think, maybe
153		they think they'll get a deal out of them or somethin'.
154	T/B:	They go with the people with the most power to get a better deal.
155		You know, I'm just wondering, what did Brutus say in his speech though.
156	TYR:	he said- Caesar's trying to get too much power, he's too ambitious, so we had to kill him.
157	T/B:	So what does it tell you if people want to make him king and Brutus has just given this whole
158		speech saying what was wrong with Caesar is he'd got too ambitious, he wanted to get too much power,
159		he wanted to be king?
160	TYR:	people are too closed minded.

The irony that Mrs. Bailey points out at line 142, and that Candace immediately picks up at lines 146ff., characterizes the plebeians as fickle and inconsistent – they cheer Brutus for killing Caesar the dictator and then immediately want to make Brutus a dictator. At line 152 a student attributes a more rational, if unflattering, motive to the plebeians, suggesting that they are looking out for their own self-interest. But at line 157 Mrs. Bailey directs them away from this reading, toward voicing the plebeians as more fickle and irrational. Other students then pick up this voicing for the plebeians.

168	CAS:	that they just jumpin' at the first thing they see? like if some thing good- like if you buyin'
169		clothes or somethin'? go to the store- it's real nice and it's high priced sort of- you just jump at
170		it? get it? and you walk to another [store afterwards, it's cheaper-
171	CAN:	[but it's ugly and you don't want to ever
172	CAS:	but it's cheaper and now you feel
173	CAN:	and you're like hey, I got this? but I got stuck with this. go uh.
174	TYI:	I know? take it [back?
175	Female ST:	[uh. Hnhnhn
176	T/B:	OK, you can t(hh)ake it b(hh)ack when you're talking about clothing? what do you do about

177	Female ST:	sometimes you can't take it back.
178	Female ST:	I don't take no clothes back.
179	STS:	[1 sec overlapping comments]
180	T/B:	what do you- what do you do about political leaders though? (1.0) you just jump one
181		way or the other, what do you do about, you know- what do you do about a political leader.
182		can you just say oh, made a mistake? This one's gonna be better over here.

Cassandra presents an analogy to describe the plebeians' behavior: they are picking political leaders, and perhaps even forms of government, the way a fickle and impulsive shopper would respond to commodities in a store. Mrs. Bailey laughs about this analogy at line 176, and she points out that changing political leaders can be more difficult than returning commodities to a store. The students agree with this, but they say that the Roman plebeians are nonetheless treating their political choices this way. Before changing the topic to Brutus, the teacher summarizes the voice that students and teacher together seem to be presupposing for the fickle plebeians: "they're jumping from one to the other" (line 188).

In their discussion from lines 139-188, the teacher and students work together to voice the plebeians as fickle and foolish in their attitudes toward politicians. The teacher may have introduced this voicing with her question at line 142 and reinforced it with her question at line 157, but the students quickly pick it up and expand it. The teacher does not simply impose this harsh or cynical attitude toward the common people on the students. The teacher does adopt a relatively cynical position with respect to the plebeians, and with respect to Brutus and Antony as well. It would also be partly correct to say that, at least during this classroom discussion, many students adopt the teacher's cynical position with respect to politicians' motives and with respect to the worth and intelligence of the common people. But the students do not passively adopt the teacher's positioning. Instead they actively appropriate and elaborate it.

The following segment further illustrates how the students go beyond the teacher in their voicing of the plebeians. The first few lines of this segment show students reading from the text two lines spoken by Roman plebeians.

493	Female ST:	There is not a nobler man in Rome than Antony?
494	Female STS:	hahahaha
495	Female ST:	now mark him? he begins again to speak?
496	Female STS:	hnhhahaha
497	T/B:	what has happened.
498	Female ST:	they changed their attitude?
499	Lakisha:	they silly.
500	STS:	hahahahahahah
501	TYI:	anybody. I betcha I could go to Rome and set up there and say

502		Antony is wrong? [CROWN Tyisha!
503	Male & Female STS:	[hahahhah HAHAhahhahaahahahahah
504	T/B:	Is everybody in his camp yet. I mean is everybody there saying Antony is right, Caesar was
505		wrong?
506	TYI:	No, just us.
507	CAN:	trying to say, in a way trying to get people to change their minds? minds are changing in each
508		of the steps cause after he talks their minds'll keep changing and changing. and today like yeah
509		let's go after Brutus?

In this segment Tyisha calls the plebeians "silly," and immediately following this segment Maurice calls them "stupid," both of which follow the voicing that teacher and students established earlier. Tyisha also gives a hypothetical example that characterizes the Roman plebeians. She imagines herself going to Rome, getting on the stage and saying that Antony is wrong – just as he has implied that Brutus is wrong – and she proposes that the plebeians would be fickle and foolish enough to demand her coronation, even though they know nothing about her. Candace gives a similar characterization of the fickle plebeians when she describes how "minds'll keep changing and changing," and when she puts words into the plebeians mouths; after just having called for Brutus to become king, they are now responding to Antony by saying "let's go after [i.e., kill] Brutus."

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus lets Antony address the Romans and Antony starts a horrible civil war without regard for the plebeians who might be killed. The teacher and students in this classroom discussion adopt a definite position on these events. Brutus was foolish to think well of people and to expect Antony to keep his word, instead of realizing that politicians act in their own self-interest. And the plebeians were foolish in their choice of leaders, so much so that they probably deserved what they got.

As described above, this might constitute a good reading of the play. Shakespeare might have ventriloquated his characters in this way, and so the teacher and students might simply be doing good pedagogical work in adopting the position they do. But the teacher and the students do not simply adopt an academic position on the subject matter. The classroom talk has multiple functions here – both describing the subject matter and positioning them as particular kinds of people with respect to political and ethical issues that continue to be important in contemporary societies. At the same time as they learn the curriculum, teacher and students adopt political and ethical positions that have implications for their own lives. This becomes clear in the following segment.

212	T/B:	the patricians. OK why would patricians be writing and not plebians.
213	TYI:	because the- they high class?
214	T/B:	uhuh

215	TYI:	and the others are like low class?
216	T/B:	uhuh.
217	TKO:	yeah so they [
218	TYI:	[so you know you pay more attention to high class people than you do low class.
219	T/B:	you do-
220	TYI:	yeah I do.
221	Female STS:	hnhhnhhnh
222	LAK:	I mean it's true though? You know if you-
223	TYI:	if you saw a bunch of nerds talking and you had some popular people talking, you won't listen
224		to them you listen to the popular people.

Here Tyisha draws an analogy between the plebeians and the "nerds" that she encounters in school. If she does in fact think about and act toward "low class" people in the way that students have positioned themselves with respect to the plebeians, then this classroom literature discussion might create or reinforce insidious divisions between types of people. At least on this occasion, many students and the teacher do position themselves as more cynical and worldly, and they do act as if the plebians deserve mistreatment. If they position themselves this way with respect to stereotyped groups at other times, this might lead some students to mistreat people from stigmatized social groups. This would be unfortunate, given that they are all members of social classes or ethnic groups that often get stereotyped. Based just on data from one classroom discussion, however, we cannot know if the students' positioning was transitory or more enduring. It would take more data to establish whether the positioning accomplished in this discussion does in fact recur elsewhere in students' lives.

Conclusions

I have argued that teachers and students discussing literature are in some ways like novelists. Just as Bakhtin describes novelists positioning themselves with respect to the types of people they portray, teachers and students often take positions on the types of people and the political issues raised by literature. This positioning can involve political and ethical issues of continuing relevance. For instance, we must all make choices about how to conceptualize and how to treat "nerds" and other stereotyped groups. In their classroom discussion of *Julius Caesar*, Mrs. Bailey and the students (provisionally) positioned themselves on the question of how we should treat such groups.

But the existence of such positioning does not mean classroom literature discussions have no pedagogical value. Political and ethical positioning does not happen *instead* of productive pedagogical conversation about the curriculum, but *interconnected* with it. The positioning illustrated in this article builds on the curriculum but does not necessarily interfere with it. In the case from *Julius Caesar*, in fact, Mrs. Bailey effectively guided stu-

dents to greater understanding of the curriculum at the same time as she and the students positioned themselves with respect to issues raised by that curriculum. Classroom discourse can simultaneously represent important aspects of the curriculum and position speakers with respect to salient political issues.

Teachers and students do differ from novelists in at least one important respect, however. Novelists are generally aware of and exercise deliberate control over the positions they take. In classroom literature discussions – as well as in many other types of discourse (Wortham 2001a) – teachers and students sometimes *enact* ethical and political positions without being fully aware of their actions (Wortham 1994). Mrs. Bailey and the students may have been focused on their interpretations of Shakespeare such that they did not realize the extent of their own cynical positioning with respect to the plebeians. (I wish that I had been able to ask at the time, but I myself was unaware of the issue as I observed this class. It took so long to do the analyses that interviews with participants were no longer feasible.)

This raises interesting questions for practice. Given that particular ethical and political positions can be controversial, should teachers try to reduce or eliminate positioning? I do not think so. I say this partly because positioning is too pervasive to be eliminated (Wortham 1994, 2001a; Davies & Harré 1990). But positioning might also be a pedagogical tool.

As I have argued elsewhere, students' positioning can help them learn the curriculum (Wortham 2001b). Part of the curriculum in teaching Julius Caesar involves the subordinate position of the Roman plebeians. Students should understand how others viewed the plebeians and how they thought about themselves. But in some cases students may not readily conceptualize the exclusion and stereotyping involved. In such cases, teachers might take advantage of the students' ability to enact exclusion and stereotyping. When students like Tyisha can enact exclusion and stereotyping in class, by positioning themselves with respect to "nerds," but cannot yet conceptualize it, enactment alone can be pedagogically productive. Even when it is not fully conscious, the enactment of patterns similar to those raised in the curriculum can facilitate students' cognition (Wortham 2001b).

In cases where their positioning may be out of awareness, teachers and students can also sometimes reflect on their positioning after the fact. Such reflection can not only help students learn the curriculum, but it can also help them engage with larger ethical and political questions. Lensmire (1994) advocates a "critically pragmatic response" to ethically controversial issues and positions that arise in classrooms. Teachers and students can reflect on their own positioning as part of the educational process – for example, discussing the fate of stigmatized or underprivileged social groups, both as an issue in the curriculum and as an issue in their own everyday lives. Compelling literature raises political and ethical positions on issues of continuing relevance, and literature classrooms can provide a protected forum to critique the types of positioning that we often adopt unreflectively

in everyday life.

One important question for practice remains. Should teachers themselves take political and ethical positions, or should they struggle against this? Sometimes teacher positioning can be part of productive pedagogy – as when teachers play "devil's advocate" to provoke students into thinking more deeply. But it might also be productive to follow Dostoevsky's example. Bakhtin (1963/1984) describes Dostoevsky as deliberately not taking a position with respect to the voices he represented in his novels. Dostoevsky was able to represent both religious believers and non-believers, for instance, without himself taking a position that undermined either view. If Mrs. Bailey had done this, she would have left open more positions-both cynicism toward and horror at Antony's actions, for example. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's refusal to take a position allows richer "dialogue" among the voices he portrays. If teachers sometimes deliberately encouraged multiple positions on the political issues raised in literature, this might allow productive dialogue among students.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

'-'	abrupt breaks or stops
'?'	rising intonation
'.'	falling intonation
'_'	(underline) stress
(1.0)	silences, timed to the nearest second
'['	indicates simultaneous talk by two speakers, with one utterance represented on top of the other and the moment of overlap marked by left brackets
'[...]'	transcriber comment
','	pause or breath without marked intonation
'(hh)'	laughter breaking into words while speaking

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